

Lesson Unit 3: Theravāda Cosmology

Learning Outcomes:

At the completion of the lesson, students will be able to

- Define the cosmology as understood by the Theravāda Buddhists
- Describes the man's position in the universe
- Define the Buddhist concept of cycle of birth and death
- Define the Buddhist concept of time
- Quote relevant original sources on Buddhist cosmology

Student Activities:

- Read each of the Readings carefully and underline/ highlight the key words and concepts in each reading.
- Also go through the slides of the PowerPoint presentation.
- Draw a mind-map around the main topic linking the key words and concepts that you underlined or highlighted in the readings showing their relationship to the main topic and also to each other
- Read the given original sources to be familiar with the texts
- Prepare a chart on Theravāda Cosmology highlighting the threefold realm

For your journal entries, write detailed notes on the following: samsāra, world-systems, planes of existence

Reading 1: Know Macrocosm to Know Microcosm

Who Am I?

The universe is a tiny speck of the vastness of the cosmic space. The earth is a tiny speck of this universe. My country is a tiny speck of this earth. My town is a tiny speck of my country. My house is a tiny speck of my town. I am almost nothing!

Basic Features of the Universe

Basic Features of the universe including the earth, my country and myself are that it is impermanent, constantly breaking up and evolving, empty of an everlasting and incorruptible substance (SN IV, 54). It functions following the principle of dependent co-arising. It is not a creation of a god; it is not a world soul.

In the discourses of the Pali canon, the Buddha occasionally discusses macrocosm and frequently discusses microcosm. Why the Buddha discusses microcosm is undoubtedly for he considers what matters for the individual is his or her own inner world as the four liberating truths lie within it.

Unanswered Questions

There are four questions pertaining to the duration and the extent of the world that the Buddha either kept silent about or rejected or brushed aside. Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is the world finite? Is the world infinite? Why does the Buddha refrain from answering these questions? As a discourse points out, they are not useful, not related to the basic discipline of the holy life, not conducive to detachment, dispassion, cessation, pacification, higher knowledge, enlightenment and Nibbāna (MN I, 431).

World that Really Matters

The world that really matters is the world of the worldly person, his inner and outer world; it is the world where one lives with such ideas and expressions as "I am so and so; this is my family; this property is mine; this is my religion; and this is my country." The worldly person's world is always erroneously perceived and subjectively interpreted because his perceptual process is grounded on his feelings, inclinations, imaginations, discriminations, and mental habits.

In this chapter an argument is formulated to show that Buddha's discussions on macrocosm too is for knowing microcosm for the vastness of space, time, and population helps one realize one's true place in the cosmic context, and as a result, propels one to work out one's liberation diligently.

The universe is enormous in terms of space, time, and population. In the vastness of the cosmic space are located innumerable numbers of worlds.

Loka and Loka-dhātu

Loka is the term used in the early Buddhist texts to identify this entire cosmos as well as the world of the individual. It is used in the sense of constantly breaking up (*lujjati*) (SN IV, 52). As it has already been observed, the term *lokadhātu* indicates a smaller unit, a solar system, within the *loka* ("loka" by M.M.J. Marasinghe, in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* Volume VI, Fascicle 3: Lobha – Mahāvamsa, ed. by W.G. Weeraratne, Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, Government of Sri Lanka, 2003, pp. 330-345). A *lokadhātu* itself extends "as far as the moon and the sun move in their course and light up the quarters with their radiance" (AN V, 59).

World Systems

There are three large world-systems recognized, the first with 1000 suns, the second with 1,000,000 suns and the third with 1,000,000,000 suns (AN I, 227; AN V, 59-60).

The Thousand-fold Minor World-System is the one that consists of 1000 suns. As far as the suns and moons revolve, shining and shedding their light in space, so far extends the **Thousand-fold Minor World-System (*sahasī cūḷanikā loka-dhātu*)**. In it there are a thousand moons, a thousand suns, thousands of earths and thousands of heavenly worlds. The text continues with the wording: "a thousand Sinerus, the kings of mountains, a thousand Rose-Apple Lands, a thousand Western Ox-Wains, a thousand Northern Kurus, a thousand Eastern Videhas; a thousand of the fourfold oceans, a thousand of the fourfold great rulers, a thousand Cātummahārājikas, a thousand Tāvātimsas, a thousand Yāmas, a thousand Tusitas, a thousand Nimmāṇaratis, a thousand Paranimmitavasavattis, a thousand Brahma-worlds. This, Ānanda, is called the Thousandfold Minor World-System.

The Two Thousand-fold Middling World-System (***dvi-sahasī majjhimikā loka-dhātu***) consists of thousand times the Thousand-fold Minor World-System. The Three Thousand-fold Major World-System (***ti-sahasī mahā-sahasī loka-dhātu***) contains thousand times the Two Thousand-fold Middling World-System.

Reaching the End of the World

In this vastness of space, to reach the end of the world by traveling even with a high speed body is impossible. "Bhikkhus, I say that the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by traveling" (SN IV, 98). As a discourse has it, the young *deva* Rohitassa confesses: Once in the past, I was a seer named Rohitassa, son of Bhoja, possessed of spiritual power, able to travel through the sky. My speed was such that I could move just as swiftly as a

firm-bowed archer – trained, skilful, practiced, experienced – could easily shoot past the shadow of a Palmyra tree with a light arrow. My stride was such that it seemed to reach from the eastern ocean to the western ocean.

Then the wish arose in me: ‘I will reach the end of the world by travelling.’ Possessing such speed and such a stride, and having a life span of a hundred years, living for a hundred years, I traveled for a hundred years, without posing except to eat, drink, take meals and snacks, to defecate and urinate, to sleep and dispel fatigue; yet I died along the way without having reached the end of the world SN I, 61-62).

Change Within and Without

These mighty galactic systems, the planets of the universe are always subject to change internally and externally. Each and every planet of the universe is in a process of contraction (*samvaṭṭamāna*) (AN V, 60) and expansion (*vivaṭṭamāna*); it is in a process of dissolution and evolution.

As it is explained in a text, the destruction of the earth takes place as a result of the gradual appearance of seven consecutive suns. Lack of rain and the subsequent heat cause the appearance of the second sun, which in turn give rise to the third sun, and so forth (AN IV, 100-5).

Aeon

An aeon (*kappa*), an incalculable time period, is taken for the completion of a contraction process of a planetary system. Aeon is the largest scale of measurement in the cosmic context. There are four periods for an aeon: period of rolling up, the period of being rolled up standing still, the period of rolling out, and the period of being rolled out standing still. Each of the four periods is incalculable (AN II, 142).

The duration of an aeon is so vast that it could only be presented through similes. The Buddha has given two similes. “Suppose there were a city of iron walls, one *yojana* (about seven miles) in length, one *yojana* in width and one *yojana* high, filled up with mustard seeds, wherefrom a man were to take out at the end of every hundred years one mustard seed. That pile of mustard seeds would in this way be sooner done away with and ended than an aeon” (SN II, 182). The second simile reads: “suppose there were a great mountain, one *yojana* in length, one *yojana* in breadth and one *yojana* in height without chasms or clefts – a solid mass. And a man at the end of every hundred years were to rub it once each time with a *Kāsi*-cloth. Well, the mountain in this way would be sooner rubbed out and destroyed than an aeon” (SN II, 182).

Innumerable such aeons have already elapsed and it is difficult to reckon them. “Suppose there were four disciples of a life-span of a hundred years, living here for a hundred years. They were to recollect everyday a hundred thousand aeons. Thus recollecting aeons, the four disciples of a hundred years’ life-span, living for a hundred years may die without finishing the counting. Thus, many aeons have passed and gone by. It is not easy to count up – as so many aeons, so many hundred aeons, so many thousand aeons and so many hundred thousand aeons have passed and gone by” (SN II, 184).

Population

In this vastness of cosmic space and time, infinite numbers of beings are caught up in the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). The round of rebirths has its origin in eternity: “It is

impossible to find any beginning from which beings steeped in ignorance and bound up by the thirst for existence wander aimlessly from rebirth to rebirth” (SN II, 179).

The rebirth takes place in the five destinies (*pañca-gati*) and the threefold world (*tayo bhava*). The Five Destinies, the life forms that concerned with humans, are: the hellish beings, the animals, the departed spirits, the humans, and the gods. The Three-fold World where earthly humans may be reborn consists of: **Kāma-dhātu**, Rūpa-dhātu, and Arūpa-dhātu. The Kāmadhātu or the world of desire, or of the five senses, includes the destinies of the hells, animals, departed spirits, humans, and some of the gods known as the six classes of gods of the world of desire.

Rūpa-dhātu or the world of subtle matter includes heavenly beings who have been reborn into the world of Brahmā and who are distributed throughout the spheres of the four jhānas (trance states). **Arūpa-dhātu** or the world of formless includes heavenly beings who have been reborn, in the shape of a “mental series”, in the spheres of the four attainments (*samāpatti*). These spheres consists of the sphere of unlimited space, the sphere of unlimited consciousness, the sphere of nothingness, and the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception which is the summit of worldly existence.

In this vastness of population, beings could be classified in various ways. According to a classification, there are four kinds of generation: the egg-born generation or the beings born by breaking out of the shell of an egg; the womb-born generation or the beings born by breaking out from the caul; the moisture-born generation or the beings born in a rotten fish, in a rotten corpse, in rotten dough, in a cesspit, or in a sewer; and the spontaneous generation or the gods and denizens of hell and certain human beings and some beings in the lower world.

There are beings different and distinguishable from each other in mind and body. Humans belong to this category. There are beings different in body but one in mind, beings alike in body but different in mind and beings alike both in body and mind. Another classification reads that there are beings who could be classified as the no footed, the two-footed, the four-footed, the many-footed, those having or lacking material form, the conscious, the unconscious, and the super conscious.

To point out the first beginnings for these beings is impossible.

Real Minority

In this vastness, the human population forms a minority that could be compared to a little soil taken by one's fingers and the non-humans to the rest of the soil on the earth. Buddha asked his monks: “Which is greater – the little bit of sand on my fingernail, or the great earth?” “Lord, great by far is the great earth. Tiny is the sand on your fingernail. The two cannot be compared.” “So too, beings who are born as humans are few in number. Far greater are those who are reborn in non-human realms. Therefore, you should train yourself, thinking: ‘we will live earnestly’” (SN II, 262).

One's Place

When compared oneself with the vastness of space, time, and the population, one could easily understand one's petit and insignificant place in the universe. Yet in this cosmic context, as the Buddha points out, humans have a unique position for they alone enjoy the rarest privilege of easy accessibility to nirvāṇa. Human life is a good, balanced, mixture of both pleasure and pain.

Time

Further, in non-human worlds, the time scales are fairly high. Time is not the same everywhere. For example, one hundred earth years are equivalent to one day and night in one of the heavenly worlds, while in another a day and night is equivalent to no less than 1,600 earthly years. Life-span of these divine beings could be 1000 years according to their own measurement. When born in them, one is bound to spend one's quota of time.

Life-Span

In comparison with the cosmic time, the life span of humans could be compared to a line drawn in water. This shortness of human life: to die soon is an advantage and a privilege because the fear of death propels humans towards the escape from suffering. The unpredictability of the time of death makes humans think about a next world and in turn, compels them to lead a moral life.

After pointing out the vastness of various aspects of the universe, Buddha's advice to his disciples was: "You should train yourself, thinking: `we will live earnestly.'"

Reading 2: Consciousness and the World

The outer world is always a world apprehended by consciousness and the type of consciousness determines the nature of the world that appears.

Consciousness and the world are mutually dependent and inextricably connected to such an extent that the hierarchical structure of the realms of existence exactly reproduces and corresponds to the hierarchical structure of consciousness.

Because of this correspondence, each of the two – the objective hierarchy of existence and the inner gradation of consciousness – provides the key to understanding the other.

The reason why a living being is reborn into a particular realm is because he has generated, in a previous life, the *kamma* or volitional force of consciousness that leads to rebirth into that realm, and thus in the final analysis all the realms of existence are formed, fashioned, and sustained by the mental activity of living beings.

At the same time these realms provide the stage for consciousness to continue its evolution in a new personality and under a fresh set of circumstances.

Each realm is keyed to a particular type of rebirth consciousness, which becomes the *bhavaṅga* or life-continuum flowing on through the course of existence until the termination of the life-process at death.

- a. Thus in dependence on *kamma* ripening in the sense-sphere plane, a sense-sphere rebirth consciousness is generated and sense-sphere existence becomes manifest.
- b. In dependence on *kamma* ripening in the fine-material plane, a fine-material rebirth consciousness is generated and fine-material existence becomes manifest.

And in dependence on *kamma* ripening in the immaterial plane, an immaterial rebirth consciousness is generated and immaterial existence becomes manifest.

As the Buddha says: "Kamma is the field, consciousness is the seed, and craving is the moisture, for the consciousness of beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving to be established in a new realm of existence – either low, middling, or superior" (A I, 223).

As determined by past *kamma*, the seed of consciousness falls into an appropriate realm, sends down roots, and nurtured by its store of *kammic* accumulations, unfolds according to its hidden potentials.

Four Planes of Existence (*bhūmi*)

1. The woeful plane (*Apāya-bhūmi*)
 2. The sensuous blissful plane (*Kāma-sugati-bhūmi*)
 3. The fine-material-sphere plane (*Rūpāvacara-bhūmi*)
 4. The immaterial-sphere plane (*Arūpāvacara-bhūmi*)
- ** 1 and 2 are subdivisions of the sense-sphere plane (*Kāmāvacara-bhūmi*)

1. The Woeful Plane (*Apāya-bhūmi*)
 - c. Hell (*Niraya*)
 - d. The animal kingdom (*Tiracchānayani*)
 - e. The sphere of petas (*Pettivisa*)
 - f. The host of asuras (*Asurakāya*)
2. The Sensuous Blissful Plane (*Kāmasugatibhūmi*)
 - a. The human realm (*Manussa*)
 - b. The Realm of the Four Great Kings (*Cātummahārājikā*)
 - c. The Realm of the Thirty-three Gods (*Tāvatisa*)
 - d. The Realm of the Yāma Gods (*Yāma*)
 - e. The Delightful Realm (*Tusita*)
 - f. The Realm of the Gods who rejoice in (their own) Creations (*Nimmāṇarati*)
 - g. The Realm of the Gods who lord over the Creations of Others (*Paranimmitavasavatti*)
3. The Fine-material-Sphere Plane (*Rūpāvacarabhūmi*)
 - a. *Paṭhamajjhānabhūmi*
 - i. The Realm of Brahmā's Retinue (*Brahmapārisajja*)
 - ii. The Realm of Brahmā's Ministers (*Brahmapurohita*)
 - iii. The Mahā Brahmā Realm (*Mahābrahmā*)
 - b. *Dutiyajjhānabhūmi*
 - iv. The Realm of Minor Lustre (*Parittābha*)
 - v. The Realm of Infinite Lustre (*Appamāṇābha*)
 - vi. The Realm of Radiant Lustre (*Ābhassara*)
 - c. *Tatīyajjhānabhūmi*
 - vii. The Realm of Minor Aura (*Parittasubha*)
 - viii. The Realm of Infinite Aura (*Appamāṇasubha*)
 - ix. The Realm of Steady Aura (*Subhakiṇha*)
 - d. *Catutthajjhānabhūmi*
 - x. The Realm of Great Reward (*Vehapphala*)
 - xi. The realm of non-percipient beings (*Asaññasatta*)
 - xii. The Pure Abodes (*Suddhāvāsa*)
 - e. *Pañcamajjhānabhūmi* (= *suddhāvāsabhūmi* - Pure Abodes)

- i. The Durable Realm (*Aviha*)
 - ii. The Serene Realm (*Atappa*)
 - iii. The Beautiful Realm (*Sudassa*)
 - iv. The Clear-sighted Realm (*Sudassi*)
 - v. The Highest Realm (*Akaniṭṭha*)
- 4. The Immaterial-Sphere Plane (*arūpāvacarabhūmi*)
 - a. The Realm of Infinite Space (*ākāśānañcāyatanabhūmi*)
 - b. The Realm of Infinite Consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatanabhūmi*)
 - c. The Realm of Nothingness (*ākāśaññāyatanabhūmi*)
- The Realm of Neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatanabhūmi*)

Reading 3: Cosmology

In Buddhist scriptures we find a scheme of post-mortem worlds which, while having much in common with general Indian ideas, is in many of its details unique. Here, there are no eternal heavens or hells, though some of both are said to be tremendously long-lasting; but all is in an eternal flux in which worlds and world-systems are born and perish, and living beings are continually born, die and are reborn according to their karmic deserts. It is a grandiose, but ultimately frightening and horrifying vision. Deliverance from it is only possible through the insight engendered by following the path taught by one of the Buddhas who occasionally arise on the scene. For those who fail to gain this insight there can be a happy rebirth for a long time in one of the temporary heaven-worlds, but no permanent deliverance from the perils of birth-and-death. This is *saṃsāra* or cycle of existence, the 'on-faring.'

All existence in the previous realms of *saṃsāra* is one of the three worlds: the World of Sense-Desires (*kāma-loka*), the World of Form (or 'fine-material world': *rūpa-loka*) and the Form-less (or 'immaterial') World (*arūpa-loka*), the latter two of which are inhabited by those who have attained, in this life, the corresponding mental absorptions (*jhānas*) frequently described in the texts. Beyond all this lies the realm of the Supramundane (*lokuttara*) or *Nibbāna* – the 'other shore', the only secure heaven. And this, though it can be experienced, cannot be described.

There are thirty-one states in which, it is said, one can be reborn, distributed over the three worlds. The lowest of the three, the World of Sense-Desires, consists of the first eleven states, of which human rebirth is the fifth. Below this are the fourfold 'states of woe': hells, the world of asuras (titans), of hungry ghosts (*petas*), and of animals, while above it are the six lowest heavens. Above these are the sixteen heavens of World of Form, and above these again the four heavens of the Formless World.

Special importance attaches to the human condition, since it is next to impossible to gain enlightenment from any other sphere than this: the realms below the human are too miserable, and those above it too happy and carefree for the necessary effort to be easily made.

The Thirty-One Abodes

The Formless World

- 31. Devas of the Sphere of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-perception
- 30. Devas of the Sphere of No-Thingness
- 29. Devas of the Sphere of Infinity of Consciousness
- 28. Devas of the Sphere of Infinity of Space

The World of Form

- 27. Peerless devas

26. Clear-Sighted devas
25. Beautiful (or Clearly Visible) devas
24. Untroubled devas
23. Devas not Falling Away
22. Unconscious beings
21. Very fruitful devas
20. Devas of Refulgent Glory
19. Devas of Unbounded Glory
18. Devas of Limited Glory
17. Devas of Streaming Radiance
16. Devas of Unbounded Radiance
15. Devas of Limited Radiance
14. Great Brahmas
13. Ministers of Brahma

12. Retinue of Brahma

The World of Sense-Desires

11. Devas Wielding Power over Others' Creations
10. Devas Delighted in Creation
9. Contented Devas
8. Yama Devas
7. The Thirty-Three Gods
6. Devas of the Four Great Kings
5. The Human World
4. The animal world
3. The world of hungry ghosts
2. The asuras (titans)
1. Hells

From the Original Sources

Without Discoverable Beginning

The Blessed One said this: "Monks, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. Suppose, monks, a man would cut up whatever grass, sticks, branches, and foliage there are in this Jambudipa and collect them together into a single heap. Having done so, he would put them down, saying for each one: 'This is my mother, this my mother's mother.' The sequence of that man's mothers and grandmothers would not come to an end, yet the grass, sticks, branches, and foliage in this Jambudipa would be used up and exhausted. For what reason? Because, monks, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. For such a long time, monks, you have experienced suffering, anguish, and disaster, and swelled the cemetery. It is enough to become disenchanted with all formations, enough to become dispassionate toward them, enough to be liberated from them." (SN II, 178)

"Monks, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. Suppose, monks, a man would reduce this great earth to balls of clay the size of jujube kernels and put them down, saying for each one: 'This is my father, this is my father's father.' The sequence of that man's fathers and grandfathers would not come to an end, yet this great earth would be used up and

exhausted. For what reason? Because, monks, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. For such a long time, monks, you have experienced suffering, anguish, and disaster, and swelled the cemetery. It is enough to become disenchanted with all formations, enough to become dispassionate toward them, enough to be liberated from them." (SN II, 179)

A certain monk approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him: "Venerable sir, how long is an eon?"

"An eon is long, monk. It is not easy to count it and say it is so many years, or so many hundreds of years, or so many thousands of years, or so many hundreds of thousands of years."

"Then is it possible to give a simile, venerable sir?"

"It is possible, monk," the Blessed One said. "Suppose, monk, there was a great stone mountain a yojana long, a yojana wide, and a yojana high, without holes or crevices, one solid mass of rock. At the end of every hundred years a man would stroke it once with a piece of fine cloth. That great stone mountain might by this effort be worn away and eliminated but the eon would still not have come to an end. So long is an eon, monk. And of eons of such length, we have wandered through so many eons, so many hundreds of eons, so many thousands of eons, so many hundreds of thousands of eons. For what reason? Because, monk, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning It is enough to be liberated from them." (SN II, 181-2)

At Rajagaha, in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrel Sanctuary, a certain Brahmin approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down to one side and asked him: "Master Gotama, how many eons have elapsed and gone by?"

"Brahmin, many eons have elapsed and gone by. It is not easy to count them and say they are so many eons, or so many hundreds of eons, or so many thousands of eons, or so many hundreds of thousands of eons."

"But is it possible to give a simile, Master Gotama?"

"It is possible, Brahmin," the Blessed One said. "Imagine, Brahmin, the grains of sand between the point where the river Ganges originates and the point where it enters the great ocean: it is not easy to count these and say there are so many grains of sand, or so many hundreds of grains, or so many thousands of grains, or so many hundreds of thousands of grains. Brahmin, eons have elapsed and gone by are even more numerous than that. It is not easy to count them and say that they are so many eons, or so many hundreds of eons, or so many thousands of eons, or so many hundreds of thousands of eons. For what reason? Because, Brahmin, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning It is enough to be liberated from them." (SN II, 183-4)

"Monks, this samsāra is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

"There comes a time, monks, when the great ocean dries up and evaporates and no longer exists, but still, I say, there is no making an end of suffering for those beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

"There comes a time, monks, when Sineru, the king of mountains, burns up and perishes and no longer exists, but still, I say, there is no making an end of suffering for those beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

"There comes a time, monks, when the great earth burns up and perishes and no longer exists, but still, I say, there is no making an end of suffering for those beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

"Suppose, monks, a dog tied up on a leash was bound to a strong post or pillar: it would just keep on running and revolving around that same post or pillar. So too, the uninstructed worldling regards form as self ... feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self ... He just keeps running and revolving around form, around feeling, around perception, around volitional formations, around consciousness. As he keeps on running and revolving around them, he is not freed from form, not freed from feeling, not freed from perception, not freed from volitional formations, not freed from consciousness. He is not freed from birth, aging, and death; not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; not freed from suffering, I say." (SN II, 149-50)